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## Women and Barriers for Upward Career Advancement – A Survey at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh, Perak

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### Abstract

Women's participation in the paid workforce is one of the most significant changes for the last century. Hence, significant progress has been achieved by women with their increase movements into the occupation. The proportion of women in management has increased. However, the proportion of women in decision making especially in public sector still low. Therefore, a survey have been conducted to investigate whether there is a relationship between work-life balance and gender stereotypes among women at public sector. This study has been analyzed the experiences of 63 female public service at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh. The quantitative method was applied to analyze the data via questionnaire by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 20.0. Finding showed that work-life balance and gender stereotypes have significant relationship toward barriers for upward career advancement among women at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh.

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**Keywords:** Women; Barriers; Career Advancement; Work-Life Balance; Gender Stereotypes

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### 1. Introduction

There has been a growing scholar's interest in the gendered nature career which has furthered our understanding of the career trends, Tlaiss and Kauser (2011). Over the last few decades, there has been a measured rise in the numbers of highly skilled women professionals and managers across different industries, Ismail and Ibrahim (2008). Since 1960s, women have increasingly entered into the career occupations.

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It has been reported that women workforce in Malaysia had increased tremendously, Ismail and Ibrahim (2008). In terms of population, women account almost half of the total population, Ismail and Ibrahim (2008). About 3.0% of the total employed women workers are administrative and management position, Rahamah Abu Bakar (2012). Many women in management careers are equally or better qualified in term of educational attainments than male colleagues, Jogulu and Wood (2008). Moreover, women workforce who active in Malaysia has slightly increased to 47.9% in 2011 compared to 46.8% in 2010, Department of Statistics, Malaysia. The estimate of women in top management/senior management in Malaysia especially in public sector is at 10% which show that the labor market is structurally gendered and women in managerial positions appear to enjoy the leadership role, Maimunah and Mariani (2008). It is becoming a strategic to employ women as the ongoing challenge of finding and keeping the talented employees will become more crucial in the future.

## 2. Problem Statement

In Malaysia, women who are “lost” from the labor force are estimated to be at least 500,000 people, Rahamah Abu Bakar (2012). The outcome from these “missing” women is believed to be as serious as the migrant of Malaysian who seek jobs in other country, Halisah (2012). To recruit and retain this talented women requires changes in work-life balance and other issues that are important to women. In the world of work, Schien (2001) finds that barriers to women in management especially in public sector still exist worldwide. She noted that even though women represent more than 40% of the world’s labor force, their portion in management positions leftovers unacceptably low. Researchers conclude that, based on abundant studies, there is a view of “think manager, think male” syndrome that is thought globally specifically among males in public sector.

Based on the latest Malaysia national census 2013, the population of Malaysia stands at 29.72 million consists of 14.6 million (50.7%) of males and 13.8 million (49.3%) of female. The percentage of public sector personnel in Malaysia is considered large compared to Malaysia’s neighboring countries such as Thailand (5.2%), Indonesia (1.7%), and Singapore (0.6%) ILO, (2013). Part of that, women (53.7%) made the majority of Malaysia public sector by 577,235 compared to men by 497,678 (46.3%). However, women are still underrepresented in the top management with only 752 women (27.7%) compared to 1,966 men (72.3%), Loutfi (2001).

These percentage are quite alarming when the success of introduced policy in 2004 known as “At least 30 Percent Women in Decision Making Position” is declining. However in 2012, the percentage are dropping to 27.7% even though the numbers of women reached the top management position are improved to 752 of women, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2013).

Furthermore, in Malaysian organizations particularly, the situation of promoting professional women to leadership or higher managerial positions remains a sensitive issues that needs to be controlled. Traditionally, society has continuously maintained that a women’s place is at home, Jakobsh (2012). Yet, with the introduction of education and the changing role that women play, they started to participate in the public domain and progressed into managerial rank. Women would work for a period of time after completing education then marry, raise children and may or may not have re-entered the labor force. Many women still follow this serial career pattern although the trends are moving and more women staying in labor force.

Pertaining to a survey that have been conducted at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh, there is still only several top positions hold by women in each department. Majority of top management position are manipulated by men. Based on interview conducted with Mrs. Fatin Husna, (personal communication on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2014), there is no career advancement for women employees, which bring negative effects to their lifestyle and this caused women to experience personal and professional barriers which hinder them from developing their careers. For instance, there is no increment in salary since they always in the same position for long years of service, they cannot improve their daily life (daily expenses) since the cost of living keep on increasing gradually. To know the negative consequences experienced due to barriers of career advancement, researchers had distributed simple questionnaire to 15 women employees who experienced barriers of career advancement. The result showed that 12 out of 15 stated that they are having difficulties for moving upward due to gender stereotypes and difficulties in balancing work life even though they are in public sector.

Based on the issues highlighted, this study was conducted to see whether work-life balance and gender stereotypes has significant relationship with the career advancement among female employees at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh.

### *2.1. Research Objectives*

- To identify whether there is a relationship between work-life balance and barriers for career advancement.
- To investigate whether there is a relationship between gender stereotypes and barriers for career advancement.

## **3. Literature Review**

### *3.1. Barriers for Upward Career Mobility*

Barriers is defined as a factor, phenomenon or event that prevents or controls access to individuals from making progress. Barriers may be tangible or intangible, actual or perceived by the recipient. In business world, many organizations are struggling to hold on their best and brightest women. However, the presence of barriers such as prejudices and the glass ceiling phenomenon make it difficult, Maimunah and Mariani (2008). In order to break the glass ceiling and remove the barriers that present women from utilizing their potential, it is essential to understand these barriers that women face and to identify career strategies used by successful women to overcome barrier associated with balancing work and family responsibilities.

Career advancement is used to fit employee's goal with the needs of an organization through an organized approach. Career advancement can be defined as an individual influence and behavioral process which lead to the aspect including occupation's choices, role integration, career pattern and identity, work values and decision making style, Kow Kwah & Lee (2012). There are some reason for realizing career mobility including enhancing current performance, encourage employees to take opportunity on future job and achieving organizational goals and objectives. On the other hand, previous study show that, career advancement for women are much more difficult compare to men since they had to put aside education and career progression to focus more on work and family life. This condition confronted dilemma between fulfilling job responsibilities and obligation towards family.

Moreover, Karen (2013) found that, the placement of women executives in specific areas including public relations, financial specialties and personnel had led to women rarely being promoted to the top management positons. The role of women in senior position remains largely insignificant since the route of power being held by presidents or Chief Executive Officers which usually comprising male employees.

As more women enter the workforce, their failure to reach the highest management positions has become the cause for considerable research and debate, Karen (2013). Women face barriers to progression within organization, barriers which are not faced by their male counterparts. In many countries, while women are gaining managerial experience, they still encounter a glass ceiling. Research results confirm that career blockages for women appear at much earlier stages than for men, and that as women move up the managerial hierarchy, they repeatedly encounter the glass ceiling.

Barker and Monks (1998) note that not much empirical research literature exists on gender stereotypes in organizations especially in public service sector. They concluded that career barriers up to a certain stage in the hierarchy may be broken down some women, but above that level women may encounter more inflexible barriers that are difficult to overcome.

### 3.2. Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is experienced when pressures from work and family roles are mutually incompatible, such that participation in one roles makes it difficult to participate in the other, Ann Margaret & James (2002). Various studies have shown that women continue to take responsibility for household tasks and child rearing, regardless of how many hours they work outside home. Burke & McKeen (1994) also concluded that working women experience more stress than working men. Furthermore, some other research illustrated that, in terms of family responsibilities, women may be disadvantaged beyond a certain level in the hierarchy where 100% commitment to organization may be expected. Work-life balance includes taking care of children and old parents and having thoughts that women should be focusing more on becoming a good mother and wife before becoming a successful manager. According to Ann et.al (2002), the need to resolve work and family can be avoided in a situation where women do not marry and remain childless. She also found that it was very rare for women with children to be in senior positions in study which included bank staff and local government officer.

In study of women engineers by Miller (2004), the pressure that women face in balancing career and family is the most significant barrier in women's attempt to advance. Miller's research has shown that women in field of engineering fail to reach senior positions due to 12-14 hours of work duration. Little time off and long tiring work call for sacrifice of private life which many women are not prepared to make, at least until their children grow up. Moreover, her study at Oil Company indicates that women have to reinforce the masculine system, resulting in short term individual gains but apparently long term failure to change the values of the industry. Other research on career progression of female officer found that inflexible working arrangements and domestic responsibilities are significant obstacles still faced by women in public sector. In fact, it is supported with other finding found that, women are more disposed to role stress due to the multiple role demand in running a career while also running a home and family. Time demands impose a tighter schedule on the personal lives of executive women than executive men, with women being less able to relax at the end of the day.

Apart from that, study conducted by Indra, Tanusia & Abu Baker (2013) revealed that the respondents agreed with the perception of overtime job and more responsibilities on job will led to negative effect on family life. This is because, it hard for them to do extra hours of working. Besides, it showed that women are able to carry out child care better compared to men and this end up with perception that they are more suitable for handling family responsibilities. Since they have this though in mind, it supports the perception that family responsibilities is one of the main barriers to women career advancement.

### 3.3. Gender Stereotypes

In general, leadership evaluation in organization has been reported to be discriminatory and prejudiced due to the absence of clear guidelines in the evaluation process, Heilman (2001). It has been suggested that the scarcity of women in senior organizational may be a consequence of gender bias in evaluation. Gender stereotypes are strong limitations that impact on the evaluation of female workers in organization. These perceptions may contribute to the under-evaluation of women's competencies and delay the recognition they are entitled to receive, especially when women perform well in domains that have been seen as male oriented. Such stereotypes are capable of influencing the evaluation of female workers. The literature suggested that the evaluation of women both in private and public sector has often been highly subjective and in many cases, this led to inequalities in promotion opportunities between female and male workers, Heilman (2001). Evidence suggests that lack of systematic criteria and well-structured guidelines about evaluation processes in organization offer a possible explanation for prejudiced decision making to continue, which effects the progression of women into senior managerial roles in many organizations.

Moreover, unclear guidelines allows subjective interpretation of what is considered appropriate rather than objective guidelines based on equity. In such environment, gender stereotypes may come into play. Based on Eagly and Makhijani (1992), these women credentials and performance are not fairly evaluated. Similar views are expressed by Schein (1992) reported that women were significantly better performers than men in many of skills required for effective leadership.

Based on previous research done by Green et.al (2004), most of the respondents agree that the amount of pay should be given to men and women who perform same tasks. Same cases in heavy industries which majority of workers would be men, the female workers usually found in administration department with lower salary, Green et.al (2004). Not only that, research by Edwards, Halupka and Mya (2010), the respondents stated that there are factors of success for Senior Executive Service in 6 Australian Departments in Australia Public Service. This includes high profile work and reputation which usually dominated by men. This conclude that, men always been given opportunity to hold higher position in organization compared to women due to gender stereotypes.

#### **4. Research Methodology/Research Finding**

##### *4.1. Research Design*

The research design was a survey-based design study. Cluster sampling is a sampling technique adopted in this study. Cluster sampling is chosen since the population is divided into clusters according to several department. The characteristics of this cluster sampling is heterogeneous as the respondents are from three different departments. The population of this study include all women employees at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh. The unit of analysis of this study is individual level as such, the women employees who is working with Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh.

##### *4.2. Measurement*

Barriers of upward career mobility was measured using the Indra and Tanusia (2013), 10 item scale which assess career advancement, organization policies and limitation managerial position. As for work-life balance, it is measured using 8 items of the version of Kwah and Lee (2012). While another variable that is gender stereotypes was measured using 6 items which developed by Mukulu (2012).

##### *4.3. Data Analysis Method*

The analysis and hypothesis testing of this study was conducted using the Statistical Software Package SPSS Version 20.0. One of the technique used was multiple regression analysis. For Reliability Analysis, Nunally (1978) recommended that a value of .70 is considered adequate in ensuring reliability of the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The alpha values of the variables under these study were all found to have a value of above .70 and therefore acceptable to be used for further analysis.

##### *4.4. Multiple Regression Analysis*

In this study, multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis developed. Multiple regression analysis is a multivariate techniques that is used very often in business research. Multiple regression analysis provides a means of objectively assessing the degree and the character of the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable: the regression coefficients indicate the relative importance of each of the independent variables in prediction of dependent variable.

Table 4.4.1 Result of Multiple Regression Analysis on Work-Life Balance and Gender Stereotypes and Barriers of Upward Career Mobility

Independent Variables	Beta	Sig.
Work-Life Balance	.457	.001
Gender Stereotypes	.486	.014
R	.774	
R Square	.600	

Based on the finding presented in Table 4.4.1, coefficient of determination showed by R and  $R^2$  ( $R = .774$ ,  $R^2 = .600$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The value of R shows strong variance shared by both independent variables and dependent variable. This means, 77.4% of the variance in career advancement has been significantly explained by **two** independent variables (work-life balance and gender stereotypes). On the other hand,  $R^2$  shows 60.0% of the variance in barriers of career advancement were significantly explained by both independent variables. However, the other 40.0% of the variance explained by other factors that are not used in this study. The value of R square indicates that the model does fit the data well. The result also shows that the beta score for gender stereotypes is the highest (0.486) compared to work-life balance. This indicates that women at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh perceive gender stereotypes is the main factor which contribute to the barriers for career advancement.

## 5. Discussion of the study

Based on findings, the result indicated that work-life balance has a significant relationship with career advancement is in consensus with the findings of Burke & McKeen (1994), Indra, Tanusia & Abu Baker (2013). In this aspect, in order not only to attract and retain female workers at workplace, one ways to enhance employee's personal development is by encouraging them to take part in professional licensing examinations. Furthermore, ask the employees to further study as soon as possible especially for female employees. This is due to women will have more commitment toward their family once they get married which may lead to slower career mobility. One example of the Minority Shareholder Watchdog Group whereby the management of the organization provide flexibility in work arrangement which enable their employees especially women to develop career within organization. However, in Malaysia, responsibilities to family and personal matters are the highest rank of barriers toward women career mobility, Indra & Tanusia (2013). Besides that, the study on barriers of women manager in Malaysia Government Link Companies (GLC) also highlighted that men are given chances to show their capabilities through challenging task which resulting in making them outstanding before being selected to the higher position.

In addition, other research discovered that the major factors lead to successful career advancement are education and continuous learning. This in line with the study by Mukulu, (2011) who found that access to education and training & development program could enable women to develop and participate in managerial level. Female workers can develop career opportunity by acquiring information regarding their field of career with identification of career goal and planning. This is important since a good quality of information can ensure the production of good quality of career.

Another explanation to account can be related to the increase in educational qualification. The educational qualification of Malaysian women have increased dramatically over the years with more female enrolling in tertiary level education. It is likely that these changes in demographic representation of tertiary level courses by female would go some way toward creating higher levels of aspirations toward more senior role in public sector, Uma and Glenice (2008). In addition, stereotypes are capable of influencing promotion practices and career advancement opportunities in organization. Strong negative evaluations held about the effectiveness of women participation especially in public sector.

As most decision making roles to be held by males, on-going negative stereotypical attitudes offer an explanation why women are not making their way into senior managerial and leadership roles in Malaysia at the same pace as their male colleagues.

Last but not least, the individual who are responsible toward career advancement within organization include managers, human resources personnel and of course, the employees itself. The managers can create family-friendly environment so that the employees keep focus on their daily tasks and able to reach personal goals appropriately despite having commitment to their family. Not only that, the employees must ensure that they plan and manage their own career path appropriately. Those employees who are able to plan and monitor their goals to have a better career advancement opportunity.

As for gender stereotypes, result indicated that there is a significant relationship with barriers for career advancement. One interpretation of the evaluation of the female is that suggestion to have equality in the promotion process even though women are qualified as their male counterparts. This include ensuring gender diversity at all levels especially at managerial level, Minority Shareholder Watchdog Group (2012). Although the organization in this study has taken steps in promoting women in the workforce by embracing a diversity program, more women in this survey thought that the policy implementation of flexible working hours was effective as they found themselves bounded by work overload.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the research objectives, this study shows that both independent variable; work-life balance and gender stereotypes related with barriers for upward career advancement in public sector (survey at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh). The implication shows that work-life balance affect career advancement of female workers in public sector. In attempting to overcome these barriers which is still exist in public sector, female workers hope for equal treatment and organizational support that would promote them in top posts. Although they accepted that women have certain roles and responsibilities, this should not act as barriers to their involvement in the organization. To promote women's advancement, significant transformation is needed in family and organizational structure, such as spouse support in household activities. The next objective is whether gender stereotypes related to career advancement. Gender stereotypes continues to be recognized as a significant factor in evaluations of the female workers. The persistence of negative evaluation points to some serious implications for the career advancement of women in Malaysia in the future, and for the need for cautious, Human Resource practices need to ensure that organization are able to recruit, retain and promote the best possible candidate of either gender.

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